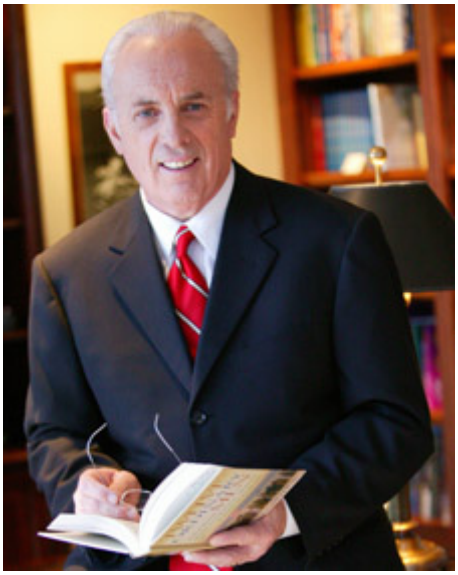
John MacArthur on hearing God's voice, the dangers of this way of thinking, and the sufficiency of Scripture



I'm going to guess that you either think you've heard God's voice, or you know someone who says that they have heard God speak to them. This post, then, is for you and hopefully will help you filter through these ideas and/or experiences. I'm going to quote John MacArthur in a letter that we received a few days ago from Grace to You. Unless otherwise noted, all underlined emphases are MacArthur's, though I added the section headings.

God told me…

> There's a phrase that has taken hold in Christian conversation — one you're probably familiar with. Whether you heard it from a preacher on television, from your own pastor, a believing friend, or during a religious radio broadcast, I'm sure you've heard someone, somewhere say the words, "God told me _____."
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> Hearing the voice of the Lord is not a new idea. I'm sure you could cite several biblical examples of God's speaking to His chosen people to communicate to them His will. On a few extraordinary occasions in Scripture, whether through His Spirit or in an audible voice, God provided specific, practical instructions directly to individuals.

Many believers today want to have that same kind of experience. They want personal, spiritual direction from the Lord. Attempting to receive guidance from God, they listen longingly for His audible voice or wait for some intuitive, emotional prompting or impression that will unveil His will for their lives.

But that kind of communication, whether it's audible or intuitive, is not trustworthy. In fact, it's useless — and can even be dangerous.

Why isn't it trustworthy? To begin with, there's no valid way to discern divine truth in what a person hears or feels. Experience is unreliable because it's always subjective. There are no means set forth in the Bible to test or prove or discern the meaning of some inner voice or prompting you may think you heard or felt. In fact, Scripture never gives believers even the slightest encouragement to listen for private revelations from God. **[I think that last sentence is a great and valid point.]**

Danger within and without

To put it in practical terms, how could we objectively know the difference between the moving of God's Spirit within us and a bad case of indigestion? **[I used to pose this question to some Mormon elders I was meeting with a couple years ago – a "burning in the bosom" could be directly related to the tacos you ate the night before!]** If you're earnestly looking for a personal, unique word from the Lord, what's to keep you from misinterpreting your common, everyday aches and pains — or thrills and euphoria — as direct revelation? Using your own experiences to determine divine truth gives too much weight to your own perspective and interpretation. Scripture says, "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool" (Proverbs 28:26). The church does not receive new or private revelation, either corporately or individually. Scripture clearly warns against adding to the completed revelation given in the Bible (Revelation 22:18).

In our fallen state, we simply lack any mechanism to discern divine thought. We can sometimes look back on events and see how the Lord orchestrated circumstances to accomplish his will, but we cannot reliably discern His thoughts in the midst of a situation. We don't have the capacity to comprehend how He's moving in our lives until He's already

moved — and even then, we can't appreciate the full magnitude of His supernatural work.

Furthermore, hearing a voice doesn't necessarily mean what you heard is correct, or that it's even from God. To hear a voice and assume it's the Lord is a huge leap — especially when there is no definitive way to know whose voice it really is. Televangelists, in particular, are prone to jump to that conclusion. But just because you hear something doesn't mean it was the Lord.

Is there a reliable way to distinguish between the sound of God's voice and that of a demon? Even if what a person hears or feels seems to match up with Scripture, how can he be sure he's not being manipulated by demonic forces? Listening for ambiguous, mystical messages provides Satan with all sorts of opportunities to tempt, confuse, pervert, and deceive. Earnestly hoping to hear from the Lord doesn't mean you'll only hear from Him.

Does God communicate with us?

So if we can't clearly or objectively determine whether what we're hearing and feeling is truly coming from the Lord, how do we legitimately receive communication from Him? What reliable source can you turn to for God's instruction in your life?

The only trustworthy source of divine truth, guidance for your own spiritual growth, and instruction for the church is the written Word of God. No emotional urging or mystical experience can trump the concrete, fundamental truth God has given us in Scripture. Does God still speak? Yes, but not in an audible voice. He speaks through the pages of Scripture.

The Bible alone has survived the test of time, and countless attacks from doubters, liars, and heretics. Its objective truth is proved every day in the transforming work the Lord accomplishes through it. Even the apostle Peter, who witnessed Christ's transfiguration firsthand, heard the voice of the Lord numerous times, and performed miracles himself, counted Scripture as "a more sure word" — the final word regarding God's revelation (2 Peter 1:19).

What drives the quest for hearing God's voice?

> If all that's true, why do some believers still look beyond the Bible for a special, personal word from the Lord? At the heart of their desire for fresh revelation is a fundamental lack of faith in the absolute sufficiency of God's Word. They simply don't believe the Bible gives enough answers for the problems and struggles in their lives; or they don't grasp the degree to which Scripture is living and active — that it is God speaking to us clearly and distinctly.
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> I trust that you're not entertaining that kind of thinking. If you reject the sufficiency of Scripture — or even if you simply look to supplement it with fresh, personal revelation from God — you cut yourself off from the only reliable source of God's truth. The Bible isn't a book of static, lifeless words. It's alive and active in the hearts of God's people. It's the vessel through which the Lord performs His transforming work, sanctifying and shaping us into His likeness. It's not simply the record of what God has said in the past — it's what He's saying to you and me every day. His Word remains perpetually applicable and relevant.
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> Because God does speak to His people through His Word, there's no more serious undertaking than studying the Bible. Understanding biblical doctrine isn't an academic pursuit for believers — it's knowing His mind. By studying Scripture, we're able to grasp His instructions for all matters of life and godliness.

You know, someday we're not only going to hear God plainly, we're going to see him face to face. But for now, as Paul the apostle wrote to the Corinthian church, "we walk by faith, not by sight." Our faith, however, can and should be fueled by the concrete, objective truth of Scripture, which in this life and by God's design, is as rock solid (or more so) as actually hearing his voice and seeing his face.

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